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OUR VIEW: The Sustainable Sierra Initiative at least tries to solve the riddle of forest management.

What are a declaration and a set of principles worth? On their own, less than the pixels on the computer screen you read them on.

But they're a start - and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy's "Sustainable Sierra Initiative" is an encouraging start toward a saner approach to the use and stewardship of our forests.

Geological purists insist that the Sierra Nevada ends around Lake Almanor, but the conservancy is a state agency, created in 2004, and political boundaries fall wherever the Legislature says they do. So eastern Shasta County is an honorary part of the Sierra.

A good thing, too. We share the problems and the needs of California's mountain spine - and might be able to use the solutions the conservancy is wrestling with.

The goal of the Sustainable Sierra Initiative, which follows the conservancy's mission, is to promote sustainability for nature and humans alike. When it comes to forests, those goals have long seemed contradictory - but it's not necessarily so. As we've learned all too well in the north state, unmanaged "preserved" forests that burn catastrophically conserve nothing but ashes, even as many of the businesses that once thrived off the local resources wither.

The initiative envisions curbing fires through sustainable thinning and logging, with a special focus on using biomass to generate renewable power and manufacturing pellets for stoves. Small-log operations could produce poles, posts and other specialty products. And the initiative even dares to mention the production of " 'dimensional' wood products" - that is, lumber sawed from honest trees - in its goals.

Jim Branham, executive director of the conservancy, said in an interview this week that the initiative hoped to capture the broad consensus most residents of the region share about, to cultivate the areas where we agree in the hopes of moving forward.

It's a nice idea. Will it work?

Unfortunately, state and federal environmental laws let a single motivated naysayer veto or at least dramatically stall a project, no matter much consensus is behind it.

And the economics of small thinning projects, in many cases, still just don't add up without big trees or massive subsidies. Cut enough wood to make a deal pencil out, and the environmentalists will be writing their lawyers.

None of the solutions are easy, but the conservancy's trying to find a sustainable future for California's timber country, including its people. That's at least looking the right direction.